



Respect: The Bridge Between Natural Rights and a Free Society

During my childhood in the Xinjiang region of China, I watched my friends' parents and grandparents disappear, arrested by the Chinese government. The only crime they committed: being of the Uyghur ethnic minority. This experience taught me the importance of defending people's natural rights and freedoms, along with showing me why some rights should never be taken. When we fail to defend these rights, in ourselves as well as in others, freedom dies.

I watched freedom atrophy as the government forced many people to post propaganda on their personal social media, and conducted constant digital monitoring, stripping thousands of people of their ability to protest. Propaganda filled the streets, depicting Uyghur Muslims in a hangman's noose, or presenting scenes of this minority group, stripped of their cultural garb and religious coverings, saluting the Chinese flag. The right to privacy evaporated with the installation of security cameras in people's homes. Chinese flags placed on the tops of desecrated mosques, with their proud domes lopped off, became the symbol of religious oppression. However, it took a comment from one of my parents' friends to cement all of these horrors in my memory. I can vividly remember the sorrow and bitterness with which this man uttered the words, "we are a different kind of citizen." With this simple phrase I understood: every time people lose their liberties, it feels wrong, because the source of these rights is not the government or citizenship. We receive these rights upon our first breath. Our consciences rebel against the denial of these natural rights, because they are ours without question, and can never be taken without protest.

Respecting and defending these rights in other people follows close on the heels of understanding their importance. The Quakers exemplified how this recognition leads to respect. They believed that every single person had an "Inner Light," or a personal ability to connect with God (Vann). Because of this belief, they valued individuals and their natural rights. Due to the high value placed on these liberties, William Penn, who led the well known Quaker settlement of

Pennsylvania, gave his citizens a “Charter of Privileges” (Ryman and Alcorn). This document guaranteed numerous rights, clearly stating that “the Happiness of Mankind depends...upon the Enjoying of Liberty (Penn).” During my childhood, I saw this same veneration of human rights. Even while the government cracked down on freedom, people found ways to communicate ideas and beliefs, and supported one another. When the government arrested a man, leaving his wife and children alone, the community gathered together to help this family keep their business open. It requires great bravery to stand up for others in the face of oppression, but throughout history, people have stood together in defense of freedom and human dignity. We value these rights so much that we defend them in others, as well as in ourselves.

When we safeguard these rights, we also protect the foundation of free society. During the discontent that preceded the American Revolution, John Adams chose to act as the legal defense for the British soldiers involved in the infamous Boston Massacre. Even though public sentiment raged against these men, Adams thought it essential they receive a fair trial (“John Adams”). In his argument, he pointed out how “we talk of liberty and property, but, if we cut up the law of self-defense, we cut up the foundation of both (Adams).” Though Adams used this reasoning for a specific case, it has broader implications. If even one of the rights we possess is threatened, it places all the rest in danger. Therefore, in order to protect freedom, we must defend every right, wherever we see it jeopardized. A free society can not exist without this fortification of natural rights, as the erosion of liberty in China currently demonstrates. Because Uyghurs and other minority groups can not speak out freely in their own defense, because they have no security from the government, and because they have lost so many of their other God-given rights, they have lost their freedom. And wherever people are not free, neither is society.

A free society holds so much beauty. Culture, religion, intellect - all of these thrive where people have unhindered access to the rights that every human being treasures. It falls on our shoulders, then, to defend the basis of this freedom, just as countless others have done throughout history. By fighting to preserve the rights nature bestows upon us, we demonstrate our respect for each other, and acknowledge the inviolable nature of liberty. Within my young life, I have seen oppression. Yet I consider myself blessed, because I have also seen the redemptive power born from respecting human rights, and have observed the role of this respect in constructing a world that honors humanity.

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